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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of natural disasters, from relief to development

Report of the Secretary-General**

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 55/163 of 14 December 2000, in which the General Assembly, among other things, called upon the international community to continue to implement measures to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, and requested me to prepare recommendations on how to improve the potential of the United Nations in this field.

2. Several of the areas mentioned in the resolution were already dealt with in my 2000 and 2001 reports to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council on the strengthening of coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations (A/55/82-E/2000/61 and A/56/95-E/2001/85), and, in the latter document, in particular with reference to the use of technology for early warning, damage assessment and response planning. In addition, some complementary aspects to the present report are presented in my report to the General Assembly and to the Economic and Social Council, dated 8 May 2001, on implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (A/56/68-E/2001/63).

3. Since the adoption, ten years ago, of General Assembly resolution 46/182, of 19 December 1991, natural disasters have had an ever increasing impact on the lives and assets of human beings all over the world. The relevant reports of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly show a steady increase in the degree of vulnerability of communities to natural hazards, most notably in developing countries. In fact, the World Bank estimates that the likelihood of people in low-income countries dying in a natural disaster is four times higher than for people in high-income countries. Furthermore, the average cost of disasters as a proportion of gross domestic product can be 20 times higher in developing countries than in industrial ones. The recurrent nature of floods and drought and the problems they cause, for example, in southern Africa and the Horn of Africa, do not leave sufficient time between them for effective recovery and rehabilitation efforts to take effect.

4. Humanitarian assistance provided by the international community over the period has been generous, but has not tackled the root causes of vulnerability. United Nations agencies agree that improvements will have to focus on better response preparedness and, more importantly, on longer-term

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** The present report is being submitted on 20 August 2001, in order to include as much updated information as possible.

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risk reduction measures, including prevention and mitigation.

5. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is the focal point within the overall United Nations system for the promotion and coordination of disaster response preparedness among the United Nations humanitarian agencies and other humanitarian partners. This system-wide responsibility encompasses a mechanism for centralized dissemination of information necessary to take decisions on assistance, make arrangements for coordination in situ of international response, track of contributions made and outstanding needs, and format the inter-agency appeals launched to include the transitional period between relief and reconstruction.

6. An increasing number of natural phenomena turn into disasters affecting entire regions. In response, United Nations agencies with mitigation responsibilities, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the World Bank, have considerably increased their disaster reduction capacities and funding. The loans of the World Bank for reconstruction and disaster mitigation since 1980 amount to some US$ 29 billion. Many of the recipient countries have received successive loans, as disasters have affected them time and again. United Nations agencies use opportunities in their post-disaster reconstruction activities to introduce measures aimed at the reduction of vulnerability against recurrent natural phenomena. Examples of this strategy can be found in the Disaster Management Facility of the World Bank, the UNDP Disaster Reduction and Recovery Programme and its support to the reconstruction work in India, Mozambique and Venezuela, as well as in the FAO Strategic Framework approach to food insecurity and rural poverty.

7. The World Bank's Disaster Management Facility completed a case study in 1999 on the capacity of Mexico to manage risk, following a request of the Government of that country. This led to the formulation of a project to address the need to reduce disaster losses, for which the World Bank made available a loan for over US$ 400 million. Similarly, the International Finance Corporation, a part of the World Bank, is focusing on new instruments in the area of weather-related events, including a Global Weather Risk Facility in developing countries. The World Bank's commitment to disaster reduction is also manifest in the ProVention initiative, launched in February 2000, which seeks, among other things, to develop methodologies for conducting damage and needs assessments.

8. The floods in Mozambique in 2000 and 2001 highlighted the recurrent nature of disasters and the need to recognize the importance of cooperation between relief and development actors. While the country-based United Nations agencies that had been actively involved in development work provided the initial support to the Government in responding to the disaster and in the subsequent recovery and reconstruction programmes, external relief agencies supplemented those efforts during the critical emergency periods. Following the Mozambique floods in 2000, United Nations development agencies and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recognized the recurrent nature of the disaster and undertook a preparedness and contingency planning exercise that resulted in an improved response capability during the 2001 floods.

9. Long-term measures that tend to reduce the impact of disasters, and in particular those aimed at reducing vulnerability to hazards, are of fundamental importance in order to operate an effective transition from relief to development. Disaster reduction is a specific area of work which includes prevention and mitigation, as well as some aspects of preparedness. The implementation of disaster reduction measures constitutes a central aspect of any sustainable development policy; therefore it is also an essential part of the process from relief to development. Although it cannot be assimilated to the operational activities relating to relief and recovery, disaster reduction can become a positive asset in post-relief situations, especially with regard to the positive impact of targeted policies for community level advocacy, awareness raising and preparedness training. In yet another example, disaster reduction considerations may underpin lessons learned exercises, which while currently often limited to the analysis of disaster relief aspects, could be carried out in the aftermath of major disasters.

10. The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction was established by the General Assembly in its resolution 54/219 of 22 December 1999 with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of societies to natural and

other environmental and technological hazards. The Strategy is an inter-agency programme within which a number of actors from both within and outside the United Nations system coordinate initiatives and programmes with the ultimate objective of creating resilience to hazards, especially in less developed countries (see A/54/497). In those countries, the transition from relief to development is longer and more complicated, as it entails variables arising in most cases from high levels of vulnerability. Vulnerability to hazards is a serious obstacle to any form of development and, as such, represents an additional burden for societies in the post-disaster phase. This is one of the main reasons that the programme of the Strategy places particular emphasis on the role of civil society in disaster reduction.

11. Disasters affect societies in all their aspects. Moreover, vulnerability to all hazards is created at the local level. That is why the active participation of relevant layers of civil society is a precondition for effective disaster prevention and mitigation. The principles of the Strategy in this respect refer to the importance of education and training, as well as community-based risk mapping and vulnerability assessment. These principles may be used as appropriate in relevant phases from relief to development, thereby improving the efficacy of the transition process and probably facilitating sound development practices, once the recovery phase is completed. Examples of disaster reduction activities can be drawn from the experience of the International Strategy and from the activities of agencies and organizations operating within the framework of the Strategy. The report of the Secretary-General on implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (A/56/68-E/.2001/63) contains details on the disaster reduction activities of the United Nations agencies.

12. Just as it may become necessary to augment existing capacities on the ground during a major emergency, smooth transition into recovery can also require external strengthening of capacities from an early stage. Skills that are necessary for recovery and subsequent reconstruction for sustainable development are fundamentally different than those for emergency response. The concept of transitional recovery teams has been introduced by UNDP to meet this need by further strengthening the capacity of its country offices and the resident coordinator system to initiate appropriate and timely support to early recovery efforts of the national authorities. The transitional recovery teams will assist with formulating comprehensive recovery frameworks for bridging relief assistance and development cooperation; strengthening the country office capacity for assessment and programming assistance to the national authorities; and supporting operational coordination mechanisms and resource mobilization strategies. The concept of transitional recovery teams was tested in India following the Gujarat earthquake, where the link between the response efforts and the transition to recovery process was effectively put into practice. The international community should support the further development and testing of this concept and encourage UNDP to further strengthen its capacity in this area.

13. Moving from a situation of relief to one of effective recovery is not limited to post-disaster institutional arrangements to support the national authorities. Many disasters reveal structural vulnerabilities and unsustainable development models that agencies on the ground need to take into consideration in their longer-term strategic support to high-risk countries and regions. At the country level, UNDP has been supporting more than 50 national capacity-building programmes in natural disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation. Many of these have started to mainstream disaster reduction within broader development strategies, attending to a range of national, local, municipal and community level needs and integrating capacity-building initiatives into a framework of overall programme support for disaster risk and vulnerability reduction.

14. The General Assembly has, on numerous occasions, including in its resolution 46/182, instructed the Emergency Relief Coordinator to mobilize, direct and coordinate all international assistance to a natural disaster in response to a request from a country affected by disaster. In 2001, the Emergency Relief Coordinator has been performing this function in the face of a changing natural disaster environment of greater losses, resulting from increasing urbanization, and the ever swifter response required by a vigilant and fast responding international media. This has focused on the need for the United Nations response to be faster and more coherent than ever before. The Emergency Relief Coordinator has tried to adjust to these demands by streamlining the United Nations response systems and engaging prominent disaster-prone countries in an

effort to build awareness of the tools that the international system can deploy to assist them. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has also engaged UNDP, in making resident coordinators aware of their responsibilities in that regard, and of international response tools that can be deployed by the Emergency Relief Coordinator to assist the countries in which they serve. More effort is needed to ensure that other United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and bilateral donors are integrated into the efforts of the Emergency Relief Coordinator to promote an effective and coherent international response to natural disasters.

15. The United Nations disaster assessment and coordination team system remains one of the most effective and participatory international rapid response tools available to the Emergency Relief Coordinator. It carried out 11 missions during 2000 to assist in coordinating international response to natural disasters in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America. The situations to which these teams were deployed included floods in Cambodia, Mozambique and Viet Nam, an earthquake in China and drought in Paraguay. In the first half of 2001, six missions were undertaken, including in response to the severe winter in Mongolia, floods in Russia and earthquakes in El Salvador, India and Peru. Over 20 countries and international organizations from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas have provided experts to participate in these missions. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has also carried out a thorough and extensive independent review of the United Nations disaster assessment and coordination system, led by the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This, coupled with a review of the performance of the United Nations in response to the earthquake in India in early 2001, has raised some useful recommendations for further improvement of the system, which the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is implementing in collaboration with partner countries and organizations. In pursuance of the directions of the General Assembly, the Office is making efforts to expand the system's participation to more developing countries and has created a United Nations disaster assessment and coordination Caribbean team this year.

16. The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, of which the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is the secretariat, has also taken major steps in 2001 to speed up the response of international urban search and rescue teams in the event of an earthquake. It has developed the Virtual On Site Operations Coordination Centre for urban search and rescue teams to gain real time information while deploying and operating. The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group has reactivated its Americas wing and incorporated many Latin American countries into its activities. It has also planned an international urban search and rescue exercise in the Asia Pacific region. The Advisory Group has also pursued the creation of a legal framework for international urban search and rescue operations, a project that received considerable support from Member States in the recently concluded humanitarian affairs segment of the Economic and Social Council.

17. Natural disasters have far-reaching consequences for both the environment and the well-being of people. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) through its Joint Environmental Emergency Unit, is focusing increased attention on ensuring an improved response capacity (including a rapid response) to such environment-related incidents. The Environmental Emergency Unit is well placed to build the necessary bridges between environmental and humanitarian concerns of various disasters. A dialogue has been initiated with humanitarian and environmental partners to develop appropriate contingency plans and to ensure an adequate level of emergency response preparedness. As a specific tool, a global network of officially designated environment national focal points has been developed, which serves as the conduit for accessing information and accessing assistance. The network is being continuously expanded and currently includes representatives from more than 100 countries in all major regions. the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UNEP have also undertaken special projects aimed at developing and elaborating on existing tools to assist countries in improving their capacity to respond to environmental emergencies.

18. The Military and Civil Defence Unit was established in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs pursuant to a decision of the Inter-agency Standing Committee in 1995 to ensure the most efficient use of military and civil defence assets in support of humanitarian operations. It serves as the

United Nations focal point for Governments, international organizations and military and civil defence establishments for the deployment of those assets in humanitarian situations and coordinates their mobilization when needed. The Unit conducts the United Nations civil-military cooperation courses, and coordinates United Nations agency participation in major exercises with humanitarian scenarios. It also maintains the United Nations Central Register, which is a database of non-commercial governmental and other resources that may be available for humanitarian use. These resources include a wide range of equipment and supplies, expert teams and disaster response contacts.

19. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also maintains a stockpile of basic survival items, such as tents, blankets, kitchen sets, generators and water-purification and distribution equipment at the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot in Brindisi, Italy. These goods are donated by various Governments and can be shipped at short notice by air, land or sea to disaster-stricken countries.

20. Given the typically sudden character of natural disasters, and of the often total disruption of public telecommunication networks resulting from their impact, the provision of reliable, independent telecommunications links is a prerequisite for efficient assessment of damages, mobilization of resources, coordination of operations and acquisition of information for dissemination through information systems, such as ReliefWeb. In this context, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has three roles: providing telecommunications support for certain field operations; facilitating the inter-operability of field networks of all partners in disaster response; and ensuring the unhindered use of information and communications technology.

21. At the regional level, United Nations agencies have been working closely with regional and subregional groupings, assisting them in identifying their needs and capacity in disaster management and risk reduction. In East Africa, FAO has developed a regional strategy for disaster preparedness to assist the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (Africa); in Southern Africa, UNDP and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have been supporting the Southern African Development Community secretariat in developing a comprehensive disaster management strategy; and similar efforts are being made by a number of United Nations agencies in the Economic Community of West African States to enhance the national and local capacities. UNDP has been supporting the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency in the Caribbean, the Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de Desastres Naturales en América Central in Central America and the Stability Pact in South-eastern Europe as regional entities for the same objectives. These capacity-building programmes are essential for reducing disaster risks and hence the need for relief and recovery assistance. Support in this direction will also assist in creating stronger national institutions and ongoing cooperation between the national authorities and the United Nations agencies, which are essential ingredients of recovery from a major scale disaster.

22. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, with the objective of strengthening response preparedness, has established offices for regional disaster response advisers in South America, Asia and the Pacific. To further extend coverage, the Office is planning to strengthen existing offices and to establish new offices in Africa and in Asia. The advisers have a three-pronged mandate: support United Nations country teams in preparing inter-agency contingency planning, involving, if appropriate, the national authorities; lead disaster response coordination missions; and organize lessons learned workshops in situ with the country teams after the relief phase in order to fine-tune disaster response preparedness. The international community should support these facilities and consider establishing similar offices at the subregional level.

23. UNDP has also established regional disaster reduction adviser positions to cover needs, initially, in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe. These advisers will enhance and facilitate the formulation and implementation of both subregional and national capacity-building programmes and provide enhanced technical support inputs to policy and strategy formulation, partnership and alliance-building, advocacy and training for disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation, as well as effective recovery programming. The international community should support this initiative and consider further expansion of this facility into other regions where disaster reduction and recovery planning is frequently needed.

24. Most United Nations agencies build on existing national and regional capacities to carry out disaster

reduction activities in disaster-prone developing countries. Efforts to bring these capacities together in a systematic manner are under way. The UNDP Disaster Management Training Programme, a worldwide, inter-agency facility, using national and regional capacities to improve response, mitigation and vulnerability reduction capacities is a case in point. The Disaster Management Training Programme adopted a new programme concept for the biennium 2000-2003 at its Advisory Committee Meeting, held in Geneva on 29 September 2000. As a contribution to the programme concept, a guide, entitled "The role and responsibilities of the United Nations disaster management teams" was developed and approved by the Inter-agency Standing Committee's Working Group on 15 September 2000. The guide provides support to the United Nations country teams and mainly covers issues related to disaster response management, including coordination and collaboration in this field. This guide was utilized in a number of country workshops between September 2000 and June 2001, such as those conducted in Azerbaijan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nicaragua and Turkey.

25. An inventory of existing disaster mitigation capacity does not yet exist, but the usefulness of such a facility, its scope of application for the United Nations, Governments and donors should be further explored. It is recommended that the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, in collaboration with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP and other partners, take the lead in this respect and appraise the General Assembly on the results.